

Death Valley Lower Grapevine Ranch  
Death Valley National Monument  
Inyo County  
California

HABS No. CA-2286

HABS  
CAL,  
14-DVNM,  
2-

REDUCED COPY OF MEASURED DRAWING  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DEATH VALLEY LOWER GRAPEVINE RANCH  
(Scotty's Castle, Scotty's Ranch)

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Location: Racetrack Valley Road, two miles west of the junction with National Park Service Route 5 (commonly known as the North Highway). That junction is 28 miles west of the junction of US Route 95 with Nevada State Route 267 (commonly known as Scotty's Junction). Death Valley National Monument, Inyo County, California.

Present Owner: National Park Service.

Present Use: Not presently in use. Efforts to renovate the house into NPS employee housing have been discontinued. Plans are now afoot to restore the building for interpretative purposes and to house employees nearby in a trailer.

Significance: The site, the Ranch House and the outbuildings all serve to illustrate the life of Death Valley Scotty, a romantic figure of the Wild West. Although publicly a man of great wealth and publicity, his home and surroundings demonstrate that his private life was often simple and unpretentious.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Note: For general information on the Death Valley Ranch complex, see HABS No. CA-2257.

A. Physical History:

1. Date of Erection:

By 1927 - First part of corral constructed.  
July 1927 - Ranch House designed by MacNeilledge.  
March 1929 - Garage constructed.  
September 1929 - Work on Main House began.  
November 1929 - Work on Main House very near complete.  
By 1931 - Training corral and open-air smithy constructed.<sup>1</sup>

2. Architect: Charles Alexander MacNeilledge

3. Original and Subsequent Owners:

Albert Mussey Johnson (1929-1948)  
Gospel Foundation (1948-1970)  
National Park Service (1970-Present)

4. Builder, etc:

General Superintendent - M. Roy Thompson.  
Building Superintendent - H. B. Brown.  
Manufacturer of stove - Wedgewood.

5. Original plans and construction: Under the provisions of the Desert Land Act of 1891, in order for Johnson to secure his claim to the land surrounding the Lower Grapevine Springs, he had to make \$3.00 of improvements per acre, make water available to the entire acreage and put one-eighth of the claim under cultivation within three years of filing.<sup>2</sup> These provisions motivated Johnson to surround over 1200 acres of land with concrete-post fencing, develop an extensive ditch and reservoir system for irrigation and raise fields of alfalfa.

In May 1927, Johnson asked MacNeilledge to design a structure, "on the brow of the hill on the Lower Vine, where I can run hot water in the Spring and make a little place that would be an outlook over the valley and where you could stay all night."<sup>3</sup>

It was probably in response to this request that MacNeilledge prepared designs for a "Mountain Cabin for Johnson and Scott." At least two separate sheets, dated July 6, 1927, were prepared.<sup>4</sup> One shows three variations of a similar theme labeled Cabin Type #1, Cabin Type #2 and Cabin Type #3, each being slightly bigger than the one before. It is the third variation and largest of the three that resembles what was actually built. The other was a much grander scheme modeled after a hacienda in Spain, and one that Scott must have decided against.

In 1929 Johnson's claim to the land was secured and the fence surrounding the land complete. In September work began on the Ranch House. By November, Thompson was able to report that, "The house is nearly finished."<sup>5</sup> The structure was stained in December.<sup>6</sup> A double-door garage similar in design and just to the north of the main house was constructed sometime in March 1930.<sup>7</sup>

The corral system and blacksmith shop were built over a four-year period in various stages. The pen area, with concrete fence posts and wooden top rails and farthest from the house, was built first in 1927.<sup>8</sup> A hay and feed area followed and by 1931 a circular training corral and an open-air smithy had been added.

6. Alterations and additions: The roofs of the house (1978) and two outbuildings (Hay Storage Area and Garage, 1982) were completely re-roofed with new cedar shingling as similar as possible to the original cedar shingling. Removal of the old roofs revealed that they were originally painted green, perhaps in an effort to have them blend in with the surrounding trees.<sup>9</sup>

A new rectangular well house, with a south-facing gable roof and similar in style to the other structures, was added by the NPS to house a Pelton water wheel, a series of six batteries (three Gould, three Welco) and a water pressure tank to chlorinate the water for drinking. The spring house on the first bench of the mesa was rehabilitated and a new 100 gallon tank was added to supply water for the Pelton.<sup>10</sup>

A new modern kitchen counter and cabinetry have been introduced to adapt the structure into a modern residence. A new modern shower stall, sink and tank have been installed in the bathroom. The original shower stall now serves to support some shelving for a linen closet. New external-conduit wiring has been introduced on the interior.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: The house at the Lower Grapevine Ranch is cruciform in plan and faces west across the valley. The main facade is dominated by a large gable-roof entrance portico. The cross-gabled roof is covered with wood shingles and has open eaves, exposed rafters, and an interior brick chimney.

All the outside walls are sheathed with a redwood planking, some of which has been decoratively molded giving it a greater sense of horizontality. The structure was referred to as a "Bungalow" in much of the correspondence. It fits into this category because of its scale and open roof eaves.

2. Condition of Fabric: Good.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Cruciform shape. The larger dimensions are 46' x 32'.
2. Foundations: Concrete slab.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: Wood-frame construction, redwood planking laid horizontally and darkly stained.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood stud framing.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Simple plank wood fastened with tongue-and-groove construction. Door and trim have been darkly stained.
- b. Windows: Unusual tri-fold windows flank the door between the porch and kitchen. All windows have wooden shutters with diamond-shaped cut-outs. Those of the house swing vertically and those of the entrance portico swing horizontally.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Cross-gable roof covered with cedar shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Open eaves with exposed rafter ends.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: See measured drawings.
2. Flooring: Concrete floor scored to simulate tiling.
3. Wall and Ceiling Finish: The walls are covered with redwood planking laid diagonally, divided into sections by panel stripping. The ceilings have been left open to reveal the roof trusses.
4. Doorways and doors: The wood slab doors are fastened with tongue-and-groove construction. The doors and trim have been darkly stained.
5. Interior Furnishings: The combination gas and coal stove manufactured by Wedgewood was purchased for Scott by M. Roy Thompson. It remains in the house.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The entire ranch is situated in the northeast corner of Death Valley and enclosed by a concrete post boundary fence that encompasses over 1200 acres. Most of the rangelands lie on the valley floor, while portions climb the bluffs to the east. The Main House and its outbuildings are nestled in front of a west-facing cliff. The location of the Main House takes full advantage of the view across the valley floor to Tin Mountain and the Panamint Range approximately ten miles to the west.

Scotty made full use of the front yard as a living area and kept many furnishings including a bathtub outside. Nothing much survives today, except for a hole blasted in a large tufaceous rock that Scotty used for cool storage.<sup>11</sup>

2. Outbuildings: All the outbuildings are constructed using the same style of redwood planking as an exterior wall and redwood shingling as a sheathing for the roof and the gable ends, as the house. All the eaves are open and the rafter ends exposed.
  - a. Garage (HABS No. CA-2286 B): This single-bay, west-facing garage has a gable roof with wood shingling, open eaves and exposed rafters. The interior has built-in shelving on three interior walls. Each of the two leaves of the double door have been removed. One original leaf still survives; the other has been reconstructed using the first as a pattern. Plans exist to use this building to house a badly dilapidated but recognizable spring wagon now exposed to the weather and located west of the corral.<sup>12</sup>
  - b. Blacksmith Forge (HABS No. CA-2286 C): This open-air smithy is of very simple construction. It has four round timbers at the corners to support sheets of corrugated sheet metal as a roof. A blacksmith "forge" located at the center of the north end has a wooden platform supported by cinder blocks in front. A long wooden workbench runs the length of the east side. Although it is now missing, one very similar used to run along the opposite side on the west. Horseshoe nails and "bar stock" are visible about the area, confirming its use in connection with the corral.
  - c. Corral system (HABS No. CA-2286 D): A circular training area with flat wood rails and round timber posts has a "snubbing post" in its center and the remains of a wooden "feed bunk." Separate pen areas beyond include a railroad tie platform for hay and feed, a larger "feed bunk," a loading chute and a concrete-post gate opening facing west with the original gate fallen on the ground. A badly dilapidated spring wagon is located west of the corral system.
  - d. Changing House (HABS No. CA-2286 E): The structure was probably used as a changing area for the swimmers at the reservoir. The wood-frame cabin is seriously deteriorated. It probably had a cloth roof at one time but only the wooden floor, sidewalls and roof supports survive. A small stove, possibly for heating the swimmers once wet, can still be seen inside the cabin. A possibility exists that this building was brought down from the Upper Ranch after it had outlived its usefulness there.<sup>13</sup>

- e. Hay Storage Area: This structure is rectangular in plan, faces south and is raised off the ground by stone and wooden block footings. It has a gable roof whose gable ends are sheathed with shingles. The west side of the building forms part of the corral system. The entrance has double doors and the interior floor is wooden. Some rotten floorboards were replaced by George Voyta, NPS employee, in 1983 or 1984. It now serves as a store house for the original furnishings of the Ranch House. Once a "large-object storage" area has been made, the furniture will be catalogued and stored there.
- f. Platform: Not far from the wood cabin is a large wooden tent platform. It is unknown how it was used and when it was built.
- g. Water trough: Just outside the main gate to the property is a stone and concrete water trough. Johnson, in order to bolster his claim to the water rights within the fenced in area, built this outside the fenceline in order to provide free water to the public.

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Scotty's Castle Recording Project at Death Valley National Monument, California, was undertaken during the summers 1987-89 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) division of the National Park Service, and co-sponsored by the Western Regional Office of the National Park Service. Principals involved were Robert J. Kapsch, Chief of HABS/HAER; Kenneth L. Anderson, AIA, Chief of HABS and project leader in 1987 and 1988; and Paul D. Dolinsky, Principal Architect of HABS and project leader in 1989.

The recording teams were supervised in the field by Marlys B. Thurber in 1987, John White in 1988, and Joseph D. Balachowski in 1989. The written documentation was prepared by Richard A. Bernstein of Cornell University in 1987.

### PART IV. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The repository of nearly all of the sources of information is the Reference Library and Preservation Office, Scotty's Castle, Death Valley National Monument, California. Individual references take the form of endnotes, as follows:

1. Susan J. Buchel, "Scotty's Home Was Not His Castle; A Historical Survey of Death Valley Scotty's Lower Vine Ranch, Death Valley National Monument," (M.A. Thesis, University of California, Riverside, March 1985).

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2. Buchel, 14-15.
3. Letter from Albert M. Johnson to Charles Alexander MacNeillidge dated May 9, 1927. Manuscript 5, box 1.
4. See architectural drawings catalogue nos. 19812, 19814.
5. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated November 23, 1929. Manuscript 7, box 9.
6. Buchel, 42.
7. Buchel, 43.
8. Letter from M. Roy Thompson to Albert M. Johnson dated March 9, 1927. Manuscript 7, box 3.
9. Conversation with Don Creech, September 1987.
10. Buchel, 74.
11. Buchel, 57 and 61.
12. Conversation with Don Creech, September 1987.
13. Communication with Sue Buchel, former curator of Scotty's Castle.